

RICHARD C. VEIT

**THE
LITTLE
WRITING
BOOK**

**Cases
for Rhetorical
Expression**

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LITTLE
WRITING BOOK
Cases for Rhetorical Expression

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THE
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WRITING BOOK

TO THE INSTRUCTOR

Goals

The philosophy guiding this book is that students need to write often, both in and out of class, if they are to grow as writers. They need a variety of writing experiences, writing in a variety of modes, with a variety of voices, to a variety of audiences, and for a variety of purposes.

For many students, the scanty and often unpleasant experiences they have had with writing in their previous schooling have left them uncomfortable, apprehensive, and discouraged about writing. I'm afraid most students don't enter our composition courses expecting to enjoy them. Too often they don't expect our classes to have much to do with their own interests or needs or even with the writing demands the world will place on them in the years to come.

We can provide these students with a pleasant surprise. There is no reason why writing in our courses should not be enjoyable. At the same time we can teach students important practical lessons about how to write well. We can also help struggling writers overcome the apprehensions which hinder their success. We can prepare them for writing in other courses and in their future occupations and their personal lives.

Writing is more than a formal skill. We always write about something, and our ideas begin to take shape only when we express them and give them form. A course in writing is also a course in thinking. Our writing assignments should be stimulating, and with luck, our class sessions can awaken students to the fascination of ideas.

The Little Writing Book aims to provide students with useful writing exercises which will help them learn to write well and which also happen to be interesting, practical, and thought-provoking.

Beginning writers have their greatest trouble with beginning, and this book helps them get started in several ways: to get started as writers in the general sense, to get started producing particular writing assignments, and, more specifically, to get started each day in class.

Exercises in the book are of two types: brief Free Writings and longer, more formal Assignments. You can use both kinds or just the free writings.

What is Free Writing?

A Free Writing is a brief exercise which can be written on the spot, either in class or at home as a journal entry. One of its principal uses is to prepare students to write longer, more formal papers such as the Assignments in this book. In free writing, students are asked to think on paper, to write down ideas rapidly as they occur. Free writing is both a writing experiment and a brainstorming session.

Free writing has proved to be one of the most useful and productive techniques for generating ideas on a topic, stimulating thinking, creating interest, and providing writers with a body of raw material that can be developed later into polished compositions.

Typically in a free-writing task students are presented with a situation that leads very naturally and easily to a written response. A good starting place in developing students' thoughts about a subject is with their own experiences and ideas, and so Free Writings are apt to be more personal or reflexive than the Assignments they help to prepare for.

Besides aiding in the invention stage of composing, Free Writings are valuable in themselves, making students into more capable, confident writers. As the Table of Contents indicates, the exercises offer practice in a wide range of skills.

As overworked professionals with classes that are too many and too large, we simply cannot assign and respond to as many papers as we would like. Free writing provides a practical way of giving student writers the volume and variety of writing experiences they need without adding to our already considerable paper load. Because free writing is experimental and produced for the writers themselves (unlike assignments, which are polished pieces written for others to read), there is no need for teachers to respond personally to each exercise. There is certainly no need to correct or grade them. On the contrary, doing either to free writing is actually counterproductive.

In contrast to the Assignments, Free Writings are not intended as finished products. As important as the conventions of spelling and punctuation are for all writers, these are concerns that experienced writers deal with not in the early brainstorming stages of composing but later on, when they copyread and revise. A fear of error has caused many students to dread writing. Often in composing they have diffi-

culty concentrating on ideas because they are continually distracted by apprehensions about errors. Many fail to grow in sophistication because they have found it dangerous to take chances and to try out new grammatical constructions or rhetorical ploys.

These students can profit greatly from the experimental, penalty-free writing opportunities provided by free writing. Students should be instructed during Free Writings to write rapidly, to try to fill the page (a victory in itself for some students and one that comes quickly after only a few Free Writings). They should be told to write whatever thoughts come to their minds as they free-write. The questions and instructions in each exercise provide a starting place, but students can modify them if they wish. They should feel free to write what they choose; they should especially be encouraged to experiment, to try something new. It won't always work, but it isn't expected to. There are no penalties for unsuccessful experiments. Students should be directed not to worry unduly about spelling and punctuation in free writing; those very important concerns should be carefully attended to elsewhere. Finally, they should be encouraged to have fun. Free writing is also recreational writing, and here the writers should enjoy themselves.

The beauty of free writing is that it works. I first began using it several years ago simply as a warm-up exercise to begin each class, and the results it achieved delighted me. My students clearly enjoyed free writing. The exercises usually led to group activities and lively discussion, and the class's enthusiasm carried over into the rest of the period. Students who wrote only a few halting lines the first day were soon filling complete pages in the five or so minutes reserved for this activity. They became more confident about free writing, more willing to take chances, and their new attitude affected their other writing as well. As a result, free writing has become an increasingly important part of my teaching.

Cases

Even reluctant writers respond enthusiastically if they have a reason to write—if the writing situation seems credible and interesting to them. Most of the exercises here are based on cases—hypothetical situations in which students are asked to imagine themselves, and out of these situations arise real occasions for writing. Students enjoy the role-playing involved in case-writing, and at the same time they learn important lessons about shaping messages for particular audiences.

Assignments

In addition to Free Writings, the book also offers longer Assignments, which can be assigned for writing out of class. The Assignments are related in rhetorical or topical theme to the preceding Free Writings, which should help to generate ideas and to develop useful skills in preparation for the Assignments. Unlike the Free Writings,

the Assignments are intended as formal projects, prepared for others to read (including the instructor) and observing the standard conventions of format and mechanics.

Many students have the misapprehension that skilled writers can produce a polished piece of writing easily and in a single draft. The reality is of course very different. All of us have known the agony of struggling with a topic that resists our best efforts of composition. Like professional writers, we make multiple revisions in order to achieve the fluent products that appear deceptively effortless to students. Our students need to know that writing is not expected to be easy and that they should not be discouraged by the hard work that formal writing tasks, such as the Assignments in *The Little Writing Book*, frequently entail.

At the same time, we can make these tasks lighter by introducing students to prewriting strategies that will stimulate and clarify their thoughts on their topics. Students will find the prewriting activities in this book useful in preparing the Assignments. More importantly, the free writing and prewriting that students practice as they use *The Little Writing Book* will prove of lasting value to them in their future writing efforts.

The Ordering of Exercises

Exercises in this book are grouped by mode, theme, or rhetorical skill, and they are arranged in an order in which they might profitably be used in a one- or two-semester writing course or in a writing center. Many of the early exercises involve personal writing and narrative, modes in which even reluctant writers feel comfortable and which are therefore ideal for getting students started.

Most exercises have the student practice more than one skill, and many involve several modes simultaneously. Modes, skills, and themes are cross-listed in the *Instructor's Manual*.

It is unlikely that any teacher would assign all of the exercises offered here in one course, and most teachers will want to select an arrangement that will suit their purposes. The Free Writings and Assignments are not inseparable units; you may wish to choose widely from among them. When using Free Writings as class warm-up activities, you may even wish to choose topics unrelated to the day's planned activity, if only for the sake of variety.

The Instructor's Manual

The *Instructor's Manual* offers ways of using the exercises, including ideas for introducing and discussing them, as well as related activities.

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TO THE WRITER

You can use this book to practice and improve your writing skills, either as a student in a writing class or on your own, with or without a teacher. The purpose of the book is to provide you with a variety of real writing experiences. These experiences are based on cases—fictional situations in which you are to imagine yourself and which call on you to write in ways that are both practical and enjoyable.

The exercises are of two kinds: Free Writings and Assignments. Free Writings are short, ungraded exercises which you can write quickly. They are meant to be practice exercises that you do for yourself, rather than formal finished products for an outside audience, so you can feel free to experiment with your writing when you do them. In contrast, the Assignments are longer writing projects which you prepare with care; after revising them and editing out errors, you submit a polished final copy to an outside reader.

When you free-write, follow these procedures:

1. Have a notebook which you will use exclusively for your free writing.
2. Spend at least five minutes on each writing.
3. Write at a steady pace, and keep writing during the entire time allotted for the exercise. Don't stop to think or make decisions; do your thinking on paper, as you write. Don't stop to search for the proper word or worry about the correct spelling. Since free writing is equivalent to a rough draft, it's all right to make errors. You can worry about them later, if you wish. For now, the important thing is to fill the page and not be distracted. You will find that with practice it

will become increasingly easy to free-write quickly, and you will find yourself writing more and more words within the same period of time.

4. Free writings should never be graded. You can share them with friends or your teacher and ask for reactions and suggestions if you wish, but because they are written as experiments, it is impossible to do them incorrectly. The only “bad” free writing is a blank page.
5. Feel free to respond to each exercise in any way you want. Create your own variations or write whatever comes to mind. The best advice is to have fun with your free writing.

Free writing is not a new idea, although you may not have heard of it before. The freest kind of writing of all is called *automatic writing*, a technique that many writers have been practicing for over 50 years. As an introduction to free writing, try the exercise below.

Automatic Writing

The great psychologist Sigmund Freud popularized the theory that our minds operate subconsciously as well as consciously. In other words, all of us have many thoughts, memories, and emotions which we are not consciously aware of but which may emerge during our dreams or under hypnosis or psychoanalysis.

In the 1920's a group of French thinkers invented a technique of writing that they hoped would allow their subconscious thoughts to emerge on paper. They reasoned that if they forced themselves to keep writing at a steady pace, writing down whatever popped into their minds, no matter how trivial or silly or disconnected it seemed, their subconscious ideas would begin to pour forth.

These writers hoped that a kind of poetry or important art form would result from this “automatic writing,” but the results were often more curious than artistic. Nevertheless, automatic writing is fun to do, and we're usually surprised with the outcome. Try the procedure yourself by writing now for five minutes, following these rules:

1. Write about whatever comes to your mind. Don't look for something to write about. Just relax and let ideas flow, no matter how silly or bizarre they may be.
2. Once you begin, do not stop writing for five minutes; don't even pause. Write at a steady, fairly rapid pace.
3. If you run out of ideas, keep writing the last word over and over until a new thought pops up. (Actually, you're always thinking of something, even if it's “Boy, is that ever boring!” If that's what you're thinking, write that.)

4. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, or even making sense. Feel free to jump from one subject to another as fast as your thoughts change. You can write in sentences, phrases or even unrelated words, in whatever form captures your thoughts. Remember: you aren't writing for anyone but yourself.
5. Begin now and don't stop for five minutes.

When you have finished, reread what you have written. Most likely, it isn't the sort of thing you would be anxious to share with the world or even a friend, but as with most of our writing, we can learn something from it.

Did you, for example, find any surprises in your writing? Did you write about topics you would not have expected? Was your writing in some ways better than you might have guessed?

Does your exercise reflect anything about you? Would a stranger who read it be able to draw any accurate conclusions about you? Did you write about one topic or many? Did your writing reflect the kind of mood you are in today?

Automatic writing can be a good way of discovering ideas and getting started. For example, imagine that you had to write a short paper today on a topic of your own choosing. Could you find one sentence or phrase in your automatic writing that you like and that might make a good beginning?

The other exercises in the book are more focused than this. However, from time to time you may wish to practice automatic writing as well, especially when you want to discover what you really think about a particular topic. Automatic writing will aid in that discovery, and it is good writing practice as well.

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